



United States Embassy Belize *Press Release*

A Call for Solidarity with Democracy's Champions in Cuba by **U.S. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell**

One year ago March 18, Cuba's notorious secret police fanned out across the island to arrest dozens of Cuban citizens for the "crime" of thinking and acting independently. Some of the arrested had compiled information about human rights abuses. Others were independent librarians and journalists. Many had worked to obtain signatures for the "Varela Project," a grassroots effort to urge a national referendum on basic rights. All shared a commitment to peaceful, democratic reform in Cuba.

Within three weeks, Castro's kangaroo courts had convicted 75 Cubans to an average of nearly 20 years of imprisonment. Their trials were a travesty of justice, utterly lacking due process. Independent observers and even family members of the accused were excluded. Amnesty International considers all 75 activists to be "prisoners of conscience." That brings the number to a total of 89, making Cuba the country with the world's highest per capita percentage of political prisoners.

These selfless men and women are serving out their draconian sentences under inhumane and highly unsanitary prison conditions, where medical services are wholly inadequate. As a result, some have developed serious health problems or have experienced a worsening of preexisting problems. In November, Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet was confined for 21 days in a punishment cell for encouraging other prisoners to demand better treatment.

The large-scale arrests last March clearly were calculated to cast a pall on the development of an independent civil society in Cuba, but they have not stopped determined Cubans from casting aside their fears and following the example of such valiant democracy activists as Dr. Biscet, Raul Rivero, Victor Rolando Arroyo and Oswaldo Paya, winner of the 2002 Andrei Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. As Paya so eloquently puts it: "We Cubans also have rights to our rights. I appeal to you in the name of the spiritual unity of free men, that has as its North Star the right to life, liberty, justice and self-determination of the people. I appeal in the name of those who support the peaceful struggle."

Indeed, today within Cuba's emerging civil society we see the same determination to stand up for human rights that we saw in the Helsinki movement in the former Soviet Union and in the Charter '77 effort in Czechoslovakia. And the Cuban independent library movement reflects the same resilience and determination that characterized Poland's "Flying Universities."

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The crackdown in Cuba over the past year has generated a growing international consensus on the need for change on the island. The European Union has expressed its deep concern about the continuing flagrant violation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of members of the Cuban opposition and independent journalists. To demonstrate their rejection of the Cuban regime's repressive actions, the European Union member states have taken a number of steps, such as suspending high-level government-to-government visits, reviewing the appropriateness of cultural and other exchanges, and inviting pro-democracy activists to diplomatic functions.

The Inter-American Democratic Charter, adopted by every single country in our hemisphere except Cuba, states that "The peoples of the Americas have a right to democracy and their governments have an obligation to promote and defend it."

In fulfillment of that solemn obligation, President Bush remains strongly committed to supporting the efforts of Cubans themselves to build an independent civil society and free the flow of ideas and information to, from and across the island. The new U.S. Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, which I have the honor to chair, will explore ways we can help Cubans peacefully prepare for the inevitable democratic transition and help them hasten its arrival.

The current meeting of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in Geneva presents an important opportunity for the democracies of our hemisphere and for free nations across the globe to join in condemnation of the Castro regime's abuses. We who cherish liberty must seize this opportunity to send a powerful message of solidarity to the courageous men and women in Cuba who champion democracy's cause.